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Viewing cable 09BAKU744, LORDS OF THE MOUNTAINS" WILL FIGHT NO MORE FOREVER

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09BAKU744	2009-09-18 06:32	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Baku

Appears in these articles:

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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: "LORDS OF THE MOUNTAINS" WILL FIGHT NO MORE FOREVER

Classified By: Pol/Econ Counselor Rob Garverick, Reasons 1.4 (a) and (d)
)

Summary

¶1. (C) The Kashgai are a little-studied, semi-nomadic Turkic minority in Iran with a history of anti-government resistance. Recent interviews with Kashgai members, supplemented with information from other Iranians, suggest that most of the 1.5 million Kashgai, while still poorly educated and impoverished, are adapting to many aspects of modern life, including the internet. While many Kashgai still seek to preserve their traditional migratory ways, urbanization of Kashgai appears to be increasing. Tehran's abandonment of forced settlement policies in favor of economic incentives for those who wish to settle, and improved education and economic infrastructure, has reduced Kashgai-Tehran tension, and encouraged voluntary settlement trends. Memories of the brutal repression of Kashgai resistors in the 1980's, combined with improved economic status and increased integration with the outside world have also reduced temptations toward unrest. Today, only about one third of the Kashgai are actively maintaining their traditional tribal and migratory lifestyle, though cultural traditions remain strong. Though proud to be Kashgai, there is no meaningful autonomy movement, and self identification of Kashgai as also being "Iranians" is increasing. According to sources, most Kashgai are satisfied with the current system and probably voted for Ahmadinejad. Once the stuff of village nightmares, the modern Kashgai are largely apolitical, peaceful, patriotically Iranian, and the object of increasing tourism. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Baku Iran watcher met separately with two Iranian Kashgai minority members,xxxxxxxxxxxx Both grew up in traditional Kashgai households (though the former ran away to be educated as a teenager). Taken together, the two sources (both unknown to each other), provided interesting social and political perspectives on this significant but comparatively little-known Iranian minority group. The following account of current life and attitudes among the Kashgai is taken from these interviews and supplementary conversations with non-Kashgai Iranians.

Lords of the Mountains

¶3. (SBU) The Kashgai (AKA Qashgai) are a 400-year old Turkic language tribal confederation numbering approximately 1.5 million people. Their lifestyle, still pursued by a majority of members, is based on nomadic sheep and goat herding. Traditionally famed as fiercely independent "Lords of the (Zagros) Mountains," the Turkish-speaking Kashgai historically maintained a tense relationship with the mainly Persian-speaking villagers and farmers through whose territory they traveled, traded, and (sometimes) raided, and by whom they were regarded with hostility and fear. Today, about a third of the Kashgai herders and their families still live a semi-nomadic lifestyle, moving over 300 kilometers twice a year between summer and winter pasture areas located outside of Isfahan and Shiraz, respectively. Other Kashgai have combined herding with sedentary farming, or moved to urban centers or abroad. Some of these remain sentimentally attached to the old lifestyle, and seek to maintain ties with it in some fashion.

¶4. (SBU) Thirty years ago the twice-a-year seasonal trek took three months each way; now some Kashgai travel in two days by truck to the pasture areas, and make camp while awaiting the arrival of the herds (which are sometimes also moved by truck, but over a longer time period, stopping frequently for road side forage). Camels and horses are still part of Kashgai life, but reportedly are more and more regarded as "status symbols" items rather than necessities. Families often pool income, and sources noted that some normally city-based wage earners also return for short periods to participate in festivals and assist with the herd movement and resettlement.

15. (SBU) The Kashgai are historically among Iran's most turbulent minority groups, engaging in repeated twentieth century incidents of massive armed resistance against central

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government policies and control as late as 1982; a Persian Isfahani related that his grandfather was decorated by the Shah for organizing local villagers to fight them. Long-standing efforts by the Iranian state to force their permanent settlement were largely abandoned after the fall of the Shah, when many forcibly settled Kashgai abandoned farming and returned to their traditional herding ways. Although the Kashgai's previously exiled, anti-Shah traditional leaders were initially embraced by Khomeineh, they rejected Islamic rule and perceived efforts by the new regime to enforce settlement. After a government-broken peace treaty, the returned exile Khosrow Khan and many other prominent Kashgai (including its Majlis members) were hanged by the Revolutionary Guard in 1982. The last widely accepted Ilkhan (tribal high chief) renounced politics, and died a natural death in 1984. The Persian Isfahani said that today the Kashgai are widely viewed by other Iranians as a "simple, honest, hospitable people who are easy to cheat."

"The Days of the Khans are Over"

16. (C) While both sources said that hereditary tribal and clan leaders still command respect, and often serve as informal adjudicators on internal Kashgai matters, xxxxxxxxxxxx stated flatly that "the day of the Khans is over." xxxxxxxxxxxx claimed that while Khosrow Khan is still regarded as a hero by many Kashgai, mentioning his name in public is forbidden," and could lead to arrest or other problems. He stressed that most Kashgai are not focused on politics, although asserting that awareness of and pride in their cultural distinctiveness is high. He added that increased literacy, internet access, tourism, and a growing international diaspora have buttressed previously declining cultural practices, especially handicrafts, dancing, and music. He said that he himself is active with urbanized and diaspora Kashgai in creating websites and publishing magazines targeting a Kashgai audience. He also helps market Kashgai international and domestic tour packages that include sleeping in tents, dancing and music performances, hiking and riding excursions, etc. "Economics is achieving what force could not achieve," observed xxxxxxxxxxxx.

Liking Karroubi, Voting Ahmedinejad

17. (C) Both sources opined that the large majority of Kashgai personally like Mehdi Karroubi, regarding him favorably as an ethnic Lur with sympathy and understanding for their traditions. However, both stressed that most Kashgai are apolitical and pragmatic, and focused on their immediate personal situation, not larger issues. For this reason, they opined that most Kashgai probably voted for Ahmadinejad, as a result of gratitude for improved health, education, and infrastructure services and/or monetary inducements. Overall, they opined that most Kashgai have little interest in the election issue, seeing it as "Tehran's business."

18. (C) Both sources related approvingly that since the mid-1980s the central regime has moved away from forced settlement to more relaxed and nuanced policies allowing peaceful herding to be pursued, but offering economic and social incentives (including free housing, electricity, and cash subsidies) for those who are willing to settle. Education is mandatory for all children until the age of twelve; many are taught in tent schools by teachers (sometimes also Kashgai) who travel with the community. The merchant said that school curricula include instruction in officially "correct" Islamic religious beliefs and rituals, and "teach Persian (not Kashgai) history, language, and

culture." According to sources, few Kashgai focus on religion or seek clerical careers, and mostly Persian mullahs who teach religion or visit to proselytize are "tolerated," but not followed. Kashgai women work outside and do not wear the chador except when visiting towns.

Economic Conditions

¶9. (C) Both sources noted that pursuit of education beyond age twelve is becoming more common, though this often requires abandonment of the transhumant lifestyle, and is still resisted by some adults as a source of alienation.

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Defying clan elders runs the risk of becoming an outcast. xxxxxxxxxxxx who ran away at sixteen, to avoid a forced marriage and obtain further education, said that it took many years for him to reforge links to the community. Both said that many young Kashgai males now seek work as unskilled labor in the cities, providing remittances and returning periodically to help out the family. Many of these end up in Turkey, where employment opportunities are better and their native language is understood. Others try to make it to Europe or North America, legally or not. He noted that most young Kashgai are internet-literate, and are utilizing the internet to create and follow Kashgai websites promoting information on Kashgai traditions and culture, connecting to the diaspora, and assisting with job searches and other economic issues. He said that Kashgai young also use the internet to tap into international mass (mainly youth) culture sites xxxxxxxxxxxx claimed that many young herders "follow the NBA... and listen to rap."

¶10. (SBU) Some Kashgai seek education to become health workers or teachers, others become unskilled workers or seek work with traders shuttling back and forth from towns where they specialize in selling Kashgai carpets and handicrafts to Iranians and foreigners. The resulting remittances are used by their families to buy trucks and other more expensive hard goods; less expensive hard goods and consumables are still acquired through barter of fresh meat and live sheep to (mainly Persian) villagers and merchants. Government subsidies, good prices for lamb and wool, and sale of handicrafts have combined to increase Kashgai prosperity in recent years, though most are still impoverished. While Kashgai carpets are world renowned, xxxxxxxxxxxx observed that most of the income from this business does not reach the Kashgai, since most of the Kashgai handicraft business is in the hands of non-Kashgai merchants and government buyers. xxxxxxxxxxxx claimed that Kashgai carpets that take several months to make and retail for more than a thousand dollars typically earn its (generally female) maker as little as fifty dollars.

"We are Iranians"

¶11. (C) Despite sporadic central government efforts to obstruct tribal movements, enforce Persian norms of Islam and strict dress codes for women, and exact excessive bribes, both sources denied that severe state-Kashgai tensions exist, and portrayed the Kashgai as politically quiescent since the 1980,s. They stressed that, unlike other traditionally restive Iranian minorities (e.g., Baluchis, Kurds, and Arabs) there is no significant Kashgai separatist or autonomy movement. The sources noted that, in contrast to these Sunni-majority groups, the Kashgai, like most Persians, are overwhelmingly Sh'ia and thus do not suffer the religious discrimination reportedly experienced by Sunni Iranians. They also pointed out that, unlike other minorities, the Kashgai are not linked to populations in other countries, have no written language (obviating many cultural issues), and have no historical "national" ideology. In addition, they noted, both urbanized and traditional transhumant Kashgai are increasingly tied to and dependent on the larger

Iranian economy and their Persian neighbors. Instead the carpet merchant asserted, "we are not Persians, but we ARE Iranians."

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